

Believe what you like?



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Or believe what you must?

The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

Established 1842

The Inquirer is the oldest

Nonconformist religious newspaper

"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."

From the Object passed at the General Assembly of the Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, 2001

The Inquirer is published fortnightly by The Inquirer Publishing Company (2004), Registered Charity 1101039.

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Cover illustration created from

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Advertise for £6 per column cm, on 3-col page, plus VAT or £7.50 per col cm, on a 2-col page. A one-page supplement is £200. One column on a 2-col page is £100, on a 3-col page, £75. A5 fliers may be inserted for £95 plus VAT.

Contact the editor for details.

Births, marriages and deaths are 50p a word plus VAT.

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Inquiring Words

Blessed are you life, essence of creation

Thanks to your goodness this time we offer

Work of our minds, fruit of our lives

It will become a gift of love.

Blessed be life

Blessed be love

Blessed be all

Forever

Amen.

— By Angela Maher

Inspired by the Novus Ordo Eucharistic Prayer



Pixabay photo of a Chinese plum tree

Tears of Love

Of your charity,

oh my Lord,

let me weep.

For tears touched

by the magic of sunlight

become diamonds,

and golden memories

light up my dark road.

In your compassion,

oh my Lady,

let me flourish

like a Chinese plum tree

that blooms in winter,

flowers of pink and red,

bright with bitter ice

melting into love.

I offer you thanks,

oh my Father,

for your sweet angel

who led me away

from self destruction

to a great high plain,

where the circle whirls

and life has no ending.

My spirit may rest now,

your heart in mine,

and mine in yours.

Washed by soft tears,

my eyes will no more

recognise deep despair,

for here is the place

of everlasting love.

— Naomi Linnell

Not all beliefs are created equal



Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. Some beliefs should be confronted before they lead to the direst consequences. Pixabay photo.

Unitarians have five traditions to draw from, but beliefs must be interrogated says **Frank Walker**

'You can believe what you like.' That may seem a very friendly, generous and accommodating thing to say. But it is misleading, unhelpful, not properly serious, and can be destructive. Imagine saying that to Adolf Hitler. 'I'm glad you said that,' he replies. 'I like to believe that all Jews should be exterminated. This is not just a theoretical idea of mine. I fully intend to put it into practice wherever I have the power. I shall ensure that the trains run on time taking Jews to the death camps. My scientists will produce the most efficient poison gases and my engineers the most powerful furnaces to burn the corpses. Human reason must be forced to work in the service of my deepest beliefs.'

Throughout history revolutionary mobs have destroyed centuries-old patterns of civilised life. Madmen and monsters such as Hitler, Stalin and Mao Zedong have ruled with popular support and been virtually worshipped as living gods by millions. No doubt these monsters felt that they could believe what they liked. Sadly the bastions of civilisation are not impregnable. Life-giving customs and traditions may be overturned. Both reason and reverence may be fatally spurned.

Some beliefs must not be accommodated

Unitarians wish to remind us of a vital and sober truth: we are responsible for our beliefs, and therefore beliefs and the practices that flow from them must be most seriously scrutinised and tested. To tell people that they can believe what they like suggests that they have nothing to learn, that they can ignore challenges, that they have no need to make changes, least of all to themselves. We do not tell those who are training to become physicians, surgeons, aeronautical engineers, ar-

chitects, lawyers, 'You can believe what you like.' We tell them they must acquaint themselves with the best practice in their field.

There are in fact ways of thinking and patterns of behaviour that have stood the test of time and have helped to guard humanity – the most self-destructive creature there is – from falling into mindless madness and murder. We may call such ways of thinking and behaving 'traditions'. These are not exempt from criticism, but they deserve serious consideration.

There is such a thing as the Unitarian tradition, and we look to history to see what it is. It displays great variety, but it is definite and not utterly amorphous. Just as a rope may consist of several different strands and be all the stronger for that, so the Unitarian tradition is made up of different elements. These are still in conversation with each other and challenge one another. A tradition is real and definite but still evolving.

The various elements do not all say the same thing. That is challenging, and forces us to think.

Look towards tradition

Any great religious tradition must allow for paradox. Even so, our tradition has a definite shape, and not everything will fit it. The racist doctrines of the Nazis and the Stalinist version of communism are excluded. While Nietzsche is a great philosopher from whom we have much to learn, his contempt for ordinary humanity is alien to our tradition. Let us try to give a brief sketch of what this is.

First there is something that we inherit from ancient Greece, the tradition of Greek humanism: the glad celebration of all that is finest in human life. Together with that life-affirming optimism goes the keen awareness that human life involves tragic suffering and ends in death. And yet, even so, men and women may show themselves nobly, courageously confronting the tragedies that befall them. Greek humanism is both

(Continued on next page)

Let Unitarian traditions transform you

(Continued from previous page)
optimistic and tragic.

Secondly we face the challenge of the Hebrew Bible, brought most vividly to focus in the great poetic drama *The Book of Job*. It is our human fate to wrestle with God. In the ancient stories Abraham, Isaac, Jonah – and above all Job – wrestle with God, understood as the power which makes life possible and upon which human life depends. Some who wrestle may come to a degree of acceptance, as does Job, some to denial. Whatever the outcome, the wrestling is important, inspiring and life changing. You can be related to a tradition by disagreement as well as by acceptance. Perhaps this is a subtle point (but one well understood by Jews, for example) and it is surely valuable to understand this.

The Unitarian search for unity

Traditionally Unitarians have tried to sum up their thinking about the divine by saying ‘God is one’. They have searched for a unity in the universe and in human experience. These words indicate a debate that is still on-going.

Thirdly there is the Christian tradition which stems from the life and teaching of Jesus, the human Jesus as Unitarians distinctively understand him. A tremendous humanitarian impulse flows from Jesus and his Christian followers. We are refreshed by the examples of the great saints. Unitarians wish to follow Jesus and his Way of loving generosity without accepting the theological doctrines of the Early Church or of any other Church. Unitarians are also able to understand the mystical drama of the Christ as the representative of ‘the human form divine’ (to use William Blake’s words) symbolising life forever suffering but forever triumphantly renewed. Christianity has given us the reality and the ideal of the Church: the generous and loving community, the Beloved Community, something of supreme value. Fourthly, Unitarians are inheritors of the great movement of thought and life known as the European Enlightenment whose watchwords are Reason and Reform. We need to respect human reason in order to rid ourselves of harmful superstitions and abuses, yet frankly acknowledging that reason itself can become twisted and used in the service of evil. We are imperfect creatures in an imperfect world (though we are capable of loving that which is perfect). Reason may not be able to do everything, but we wish it to do the cleansing and reforming work that it can. Human society is constantly fraying and coming apart at the seams, so we must always be mending and repairing. The remarkable progress of modern medicine, directed by reason, is a magnificent example of what may be achieved by reason at its best. We honour science and technology but are nevertheless aware that everything depends upon the spirit in which they are used. They may be twisted to serve evil and destructive purposes rather than bringing blessings and fulfilment.

Enlightenment and reverence

The Enlightenment also ushered in the struggle for women’s rights, women’s freedom and equality, a struggle that is far from finished but one in which Unitarians have played a leading and constructive part.

All the same we are well aware that for human life to be properly fulfilled we need more than reason. A fifth tradition that we happily embrace is summed up in Albert Schweitzer’s great

phrase ‘Reverence for Life’. Love and respect for our natural environment is now seen to be an essential part of any truly religious outlook. So far the historic Unitarian tradition has been formed from Greek humanism, the Judeo-Christian tradition, the ideals of reason and reform championed by the European Enlightenment, and concern for the health of our natural environment summed up by Schweitzer as Reverence for Life. From the time of the Radical Reformation there

has been another dominant Unitarian concern or tradition that can be expressed in one word: Tolerance. It began in the 16th century with the idea that different expressions of Christian belief and church government should be able to coexist without one side trying to destroy all who do not conform to its own faith and practice. We now see that tolerance must expand further: we live in a global world of many different religions and philosophies. They are not all the same. Some are much older than Christianity. They cannot all be reduced to one common denominator, unless it is to see that they are all the result of human thinking and imagination.

Tolerance means that we can respond to them respectfully and give them a fair hearing, even though we may find ourselves in strong disagreement with them, or with certain expressions of them. We may also find that we may be able to learn from them. Increasingly in the West people are learning about meditation and mindfulness from the Buddhists. So tolerance teaches us that traditions may usefully grow and expand.

These five elements of our tradition cannot be reduced to a formal creed to be recited. They are realities that we must confront and learn from. Face these realities, pay attention to these realities, open yourself to them and make your honest response. Let them transform you for the good. This is a great challenge and it is by no means easy: it is a life’s work.

If you would like a pithy form of words, though not a formal creed never to be challenged or changed, I like these words often spoken in Unitarian services: ‘There is a Life, enfolding our lives and all our fellow mortals, from which we come, to which we go, in which all things natural have their being, by which all things spiritual are accomplished. It is the Life universal, of which we are part, through whose laws alone we are enabled to do good, but which is not made complete without us.’ If asked where do you stand? I would say this. I wish to stand with Jesus and the saints of every religion and of none for all that is most deeply human and humane against the evil, the suffering, the cruelty, the indifference, the injustice, the triviality and heartlessness of the world.

The Rev Frank Walker is minister emeritus at Cambridge.



*Frank Walker in the Ipswich pulpit.
Photo by Giles Croucher*

New CO takes up post in March

By MC Burns

Liz Slade has been appointed chief officer of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. She will take up the post on 18 March, working with Derek McAuley until his retirement from the position on 30 April – following the annual General Assembly meetings.

In a statement released by the EC, Liz said: 'I'm delighted to be taking on the role of Chief Officer in March.'

'When I joined the Unitarian congregation at Newington Green seven years ago, it felt very strange to be walking voluntarily into a church, and I had no idea that community and spirituality were things that I would come to value so highly in my life.'

Marion Baker, convenor of the EC, said, 'The Executive Committee are delighted that Liz will be leading our Unitarian and Free Christian denomination, helping and supporting our congregations to meet the leadership challenges they face as our faith seeks to engage with those people who share our ethos and values.'

Liz's previous experience includes working in health care technology, publishing and, for a time, she was Chief Operating Officer of the Sunday Assembly, an international movement started in London which has established non-religious congregations they refer to as 'secular church'.

Originally from Devon, Liz now divides her time between there and London, according to her Twitter account. She currently works for Common Ground, an organisation dedicated to 'reading, writing and walking'. Common Ground offers a programme of pilgrimages where participants engage with literature as sacred texts.

About her experience with New Unity Unitarian Church, Islington, as a congregant and as a member of its board of trustees, Liz said: '(It) led me to leave my career in senior management in the healthcare industry, first to explore the role that community plays in people's health, and then to a leadership role at Sunday Assembly, a global network of secular congregations, and more recently in co-creating pilgrimages that mix literature, landscape and sacred reading practices.'

'Through this experience, I've come to understand very clearly the hunger in our increasingly secular culture for meaningful connection, belonging, and community. I see that Unitarianism, with its open-minded, non-dogmatic, non-hierarchical ethos, as well as its rich history and track record for social justice, is in a unique position to welcome in many more people who are feeling this hunger.'

Marion said the interview panel was impressed that, 'Liz

Through joining a Unitarian congregation, 'I've come to understand very clearly the hunger in our increasingly secular culture for meaningful connection, belonging, and community. I see that Unitarianism, with its open-minded, non-dogmatic, non-hierarchical ethos, as well as its rich history and track record for social justice, is in a unique position to welcome in many more people who are feeling this hunger.'

– Liz Slade

has a clear appreciation of the issues facing faith-based organisations in a secular society', adding, 'Liz has proven senior level management experience both in not-for-profit and commercial organisations.'

The Rev Claire MacDonald, minister with Lewisham Unitarians has worked with Liz. She said: 'Of all the qualities Liz brings to Unitarian public service – among them her capability and management experience, her unfussy competence and fairness, her rational mind, her kindness – I think most of all of the quality of her attention. She is a natural connector as well as a creative leader and the quality of her attention is, I think, part of her spiritual activism. Liz listens, she really *listens*.'

Derek said he is looking forward to a smooth transition, as he and Liz will work together at Essex Hall for six weeks.

'I am sure that Liz will bring her own unique qualities and special interests to the job. We all have our strengths and weaknesses and her style will, I am sure, be different.'

He added that the process to find his replacement went well. 'I have been impressed by the professional approach taken by the Executive Committee members involved in the recruitment process that have got us to this point. And I am, of course, very pleased that having given more than a year's notice that I was intending to leave that an appointment has actually been made in time to enable a proper handover.'

Ten candidates applied for the chief officer position; five were interviewed.

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What if Donald Trump joins your church?

Iain Brown asks why churches always talk of big evils and little kindnesses, but never the converse. And what do you do with a psychopath in your congregation?

We are the beneficiaries, and sufferers, of a Christian tradition which personifies evil as much as it personifies good. Most of us know that we share Satans and Devils with the other Abrahamic religions, with Judaism and with Islam. Although there seems to be no such personification in ancient Vedic Hinduism, modern Hinduism is equally riddled with them. The Buddha, many manuscripts attest, talked daily with Mara the personification of evil who haunted him with images of alluring females. Personification of evil appears in most cultures around the known world.

Both St Paul and St Augustine, like the Buddha, experienced their evil especially in sexual temptation. For St Paul there was a constant inward battle in everyone between 'the spirit' and 'the flesh'. Paul's use of the word 'spirit' seems to be much more as part of a Greek set of ideas derived from Plato and Aristotle rather than a continuation of the Hebrew tradition of evil as the rebellious angel.

Psychologists move away from absolutes

Paul produced what used to be, but no longer is, a well known list of what he called 'the works of the flesh' in Galatians 5: 19-21 and it reads: 'Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these: Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings and suchlike of which I tell you, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.' No mistake *there*, then, the order they come in is interesting in itself – with adultery and fornication top of the list and murders far below.

Although the idea of 'the flesh' *does* take in worldly preoccupations with wealth, status and greed, as Christianity develops, 'the flesh' comes to mean more and more specifically *sexuality*. This became especially so under the influence of St Augustine who would be clearly identified today as a *sex addict* (remember his famous prayer, 'Oh Lord, make me chaste – but not yet'). But, like so many recovering addicts, Augustine renounced his central addicting pleasure altogether and reacted into hating it, not just in himself but in other people too.

Scientific psychologists gather data first and then, only later, try to explain what they find, as opposed to the intuitive kind of theorists who have dreams, speculate and theorise first. The scientific ones have tended to avoid black and white categorisations of people with illnesses and instead they tend to think in *dimensions* to describe individual differences between people. The kind of question they ask about a person is not 'Is he or she aggressive?' which puts them in a category but rather 'How are they best described on a scale of ten stretching from totally supine to attacks at sight'. This dimensional approach is



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even entering the old categorisations of psychiatry in a recent edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual Fifth Edition. This kind of thinking is best not described as 'black and white thinking' but better as 'shades of grey thinking',

So we have a scale for the measurement of extraversion as opposed to introversion and most of us come out as around the middle and some come out as more introverted at one end of the scale and others of us as more extraverted at the other end. Here there are no blacks and whites, only degrees of brightness or greyness.

Five dimensions of human beings

The five major dimensions along which the individuality of we human beings can be best described are known together as the Big Five. These dimensions can be labelled as:

1. Extraversion as opposed to Introversion.
2. Agreeableness as opposed to disagreeableness.
3. Conscientiousness as opposed to irresponsibility.
4. Emotional volatility or over-reactivity as opposed to unresponsiveness and under-reactivity.
5. Openness as to new ideas and people as opposed to closed.

But there are three lesser scales for the measurement of personality characteristics which have become known as 'The Dark Triad' and it is in them that we should be interested in here because those who score highly on them could be seen as agents of what has been called *low grade evil* or *creeping evil*, to put it more dramatically than it may, perhaps, deserve. Certainly people with high scores on these three scales, known as the Dark Triad, appear to cause a lot of trouble, not only in personal relationships but also in communities.

This 'Dark Triad', as it is known, measures three characteristics of individual people labelled respectively Machiavellianism, Narcissism and Psychopathy.

Psychologists found clusters of characteristics among their huge surveys of human thinking, feeling and behaving and began to give names to some clusters of troublesome characteristics. Then they began to find ways of beginning to help and alleviate the human suffering and social damage

Test yourself on the psychopath scale

caused by these phenomena, now recognised as personality disorders.

Machiavellianism, Narcissism, Psychopathy

If a person is high on one of these three dimensions or scales, now labelled as Machiavellianism, Narcissism and Psychopathy, they are very likely to be high on the other two so there is now a single measure of all three together, of that Dark Triad. People answering questionnaires measuring these are often referred to as 'Dark Triaders' and they can be recognised when they:

- Sometimes use ingratiation, deception or even lies to get what they want. (Machiavellianism)
- Commonly exploit and trick others for self-advancement. (M)
- Tend to manipulate others for selfish reasons. (M)
- Are more hungry for admiration than most. (Narcissism)
- Always expect to be the centre of attention. (N)
- Assume that they are so important that other people will make special allowances for them and go out of their way to help them. (N)
- Always are aiming for high status and impressing people with their importance and talents. (N)
- Assume that sections of the law do not apply to them because they are different. (N)
- Tend to take a pretty dim view of humanity, attributing nasty motives and selfishness to others. (Psychopathy)
- Too often are seen to be lacking in empathy and understanding for others and often have no idea of the distress their behaviour is causing others. (P)
- Virtually never apologise sincerely and show little or no real regret after having done wrong. (P)
- Tend not to worry about whether their behaviour is unethical. (P)

If you know somebody in your work life, your love life or your social life who has a lot of these characteristics to a high degree, the likelihood is you know a 'Dark Triader' and you need to beware that you might be taken advantage of by them.

Of course we can always ask these questions of ourselves. But psychologists who design and test out questionnaires are not naïve about the answers we get. As far back as the 1940s there was a set of questions buried and scattered within many measures of individual differences. These are a few rather less sophisticated but close likenesses of the kind of questions as examples of what they used. You might like to count up how many 'Yeses' and 'Noes' you answer as you read along.

Have you ever accepted the praise for something you knew someone else had really done?

If you say you will do something, do you ever fail to keep your promise, no matter how difficult it might be?

Have you ever blamed someone for doing something you knew was really your fault?

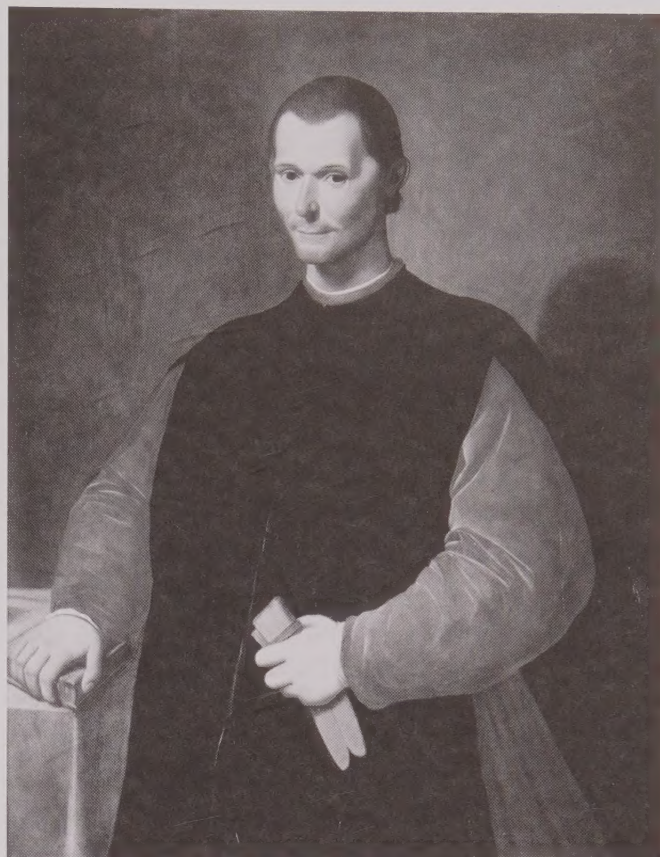
Do you ever talk about things you know nothing about?

Do you ever boast a little?

Have you ever said anything bad or nasty about anyone?

Do you ever fail to practice what you preach?

Do you ever put off until tomorrow what you ought to do today?



One of the three aspects of the 'Dark Triad' of personality was named for Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli. Painting by Santi di Tito [Public domain] via Wikimedia Commons

Are you ever unwilling to admit it when you have made a mistake?

Of course in the real professional sets of questions, these questions are not given together but are usually spread around in among 100 or more other questions about your habitual actions, perceptions and feelings. Together they measure the extent to which you have an overly rosy view of yourself and some of the many versions of these kinds of questions are known as Lie Scales. If a person scores highly on them they are probably a Dark Triader. If you replied with more than five 'Nos', the chances are that you are a Dark Triader. Certainly you are much less than honest with yourself and probably therefore with other people. If you score very low on such a scale you are likely too hard on yourself, and you stand a chance of being depressed.

So do these (or we) 'Dark Triaders' gain power and status? I think that as long as they (or we) do not make themselves/ourselves too obvious and are detected they/we do.

Does that mean that Machiavellianism, Narcissism and Psychopathy are evolutionary assets for survival? Almost certainly 'yes'. The overly trusting, the hopelessly naïve, the generously forgiving – and the people who underestimate themselves – do not generally become the leaders of their tribe.

Does that mean that leaders of groups, organisations, political parties, nations are often 'Dark Triaders'? Think of politicians you hate and love. Almost certainly 'yes'. But authoritarian leaders who exercise power in dangerous and threatening situations (but not people who take important

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Lonely but not alone: alone but not lonely

Christmas and New Year is a very busy time for folk in my line of work, everything gets ramped up. I certainly spent a lot of time with people, doing and giving of myself and socialising too. It continued into the first week of the year. As I went to bed on the night of the first Sunday of the year I craved solitude, to be alone. I awoke on Monday exhausted and feeling a little disconnected. I needed space to be alone, to connect with my God so I could allow myself to connect with others and life again. I was beginning to feel the inner loneliness that always comes when I'm exhausted or have spent too much time with others. Like most ministers I am an introvert in the Jungian understanding. I am the kind of person who re-energises from spending time in solitude. I give my energy when in the company of others and recharge in solitude.

As I spent time in silent solitude that morning a phrase came into my being. It went something like this: 'Lonely but not alone: Alone but not lonely'.

There have been times in my life when I have been surrounded and yet felt utterly alone. There have been other times when I have been physically alone and yet experienced not one semblance of loneliness. Being alone and experiencing loneliness may look similar. But they could not be more

**From nothing
to everything**
by
Danny Crosby



different. One is about connection and the other disconnection.

January can be the toughest month. The joy and celebration of Christmas and New Year is over. Winter has set in, and it seems only dark days and nights and cold are ahead. It can be a time of isolation. We don't spend much time with others. Last winter I said many times, 'It's been a long one this time'. For many folk this can feel like the loneliest time of year. It need not be so. If we utilise this time in the right way, it can help us to connect to those deeper, harder-to-reach parts which can come to life when spring returns.

I was thinking of this as my partner Sue pointed to the bulbs
(Continued on next page)

There is much to fear about 'Dark Triaders'

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initiatives in peaceful situations) may need strong elements of the Dark Triad to fulfil their role.

If human beings are incurably tribal, as I believe they are, and if many nations are led by Dark Triaders, does that mean that insidious low-grade, grey-green, creeping evil rules the world? If so, what does that mean for peace among nations? And if we have weapons that can destroy us all, what does that mean for the evolutionary future of the human species?

When we realise how much of this world is in the hands of Dark Triaders, people with high scores on Psychopathy (no compassion for suffering) or Narcissism (admiration for self before all) or Machiavellianism (cunning deceiving manipulators of people) who can all pass as beautiful people, if they are clever enough – do we even need the dark powers of a Satan to frighten us?

Finally what about the Dark Triader within you and me? Can we recognise and even own him or her? And is it as important to be aware of as the glaring big evils?

Does it ever seem strange that in churches we so often talk about the little kindnesses and compassions and how important they are but you never hear sermons about the little dishonesties, the little deliberate hurts, the little evils? Are they just unimportant, especially within an institution that consciously cultivates what it believes to be 'Love'? Or do many small evils go unremarked and build up into toxic communities here and there? If so, do some churches suffer for periods from a peculiar form of colour-blindness to grey? And when they 'wake up' from their dream of love, do they over-react?

We all fall short of perfection and have to live with that in ourselves and in others. Dark Triaders are not insane, but even with the best of individual psychotherapy it is usually very

'We need never to forget that the love and compassion we claim to practice in our loving and beloved communities are not necessarily some happy spontaneous innocent dream-state sponsored by some powerful personification of itself out there.'

difficult to facilitate change in them. So churches have little hope of accomplishing anything. Many clever Dark Triaders are the most charming people you could meet. But they are threatening to you and me, sometimes in ways of which we are only dimly aware, and we often have reason to fear them.

For example, notoriously, Donald Trump is often labelled as narcissistic. If he were a member of your congregation how would you deal with him (other than by just going away)? Where there is fear there will be hate and not love. Only courage can overcome fear, so, without courage, love is often impossible, unless, as with some abused children, it becomes an anxious slavery. We need never to forget that the love and compassion we claim to practice in our loving and beloved communities are not necessarily some happy spontaneous innocent dream-state sponsored by some powerful personification of itself out there. They often require our lonely courage, self control, patience and endurance – especially within grey-blind churches.

Iain Brown is a retired senior lecturer on psychology and a Unitarian living in Glasgow.



Loneliness can be the start of something

(Continued from previous page)

just sprouting a little bit on a recent cold morning. They are creating life, ready to fully sprout in the cold, dark earth. They need this time to come fully to life, just like we do. I bet those bulbs have never known the ache of loneliness.

Everyone experiences loneliness at some time in their life. We need not fear it; I suspect it is just a part of the human condition. Yet it's not something that you ever get used to. It ought not to be feared. It does not mean there's something wrong – and it's not a terminal condition. Ask anyone and you will find they too have felt this way too.

There are many causes for this sense of loneliness. If we lose someone we love dearly – a spouse, a partner, a parent, a dear friend – that loss can lead to deep loneliness. We feel that something is missing in our lives – which of course it is – our loved one. If we suffer a debilitating illness, we can become cut off from social contacts. This can lead to a sense of isolation. When we move house or change jobs, that loneliness can set in too. We feel like a fish out of water. Even the seemingly self-confident can feel lonely at such times. When it happens, we can often make the mistake to isolate even more, and increase this sense of loneliness.

The experience of loneliness may not be as negative as it seems. For it can lead to new opportunities. It offers a chance to connect to those often-untouched parts within us, to draw on those inner resources. And, it can help us to understand the loneliness that others suffer. It develops our empathy and helps us connect with others in deeper, more meaningful ways.

Loneliness is not the end of anything. It can be the beginning. It is an opportunity to see and experience life in new ways. It is a call to ourselves to help alleviate the loneliness and suffering in others. It has the capacity to transform our lives. Loneliness need not be seen as an affliction; instead it is an opportunity to transform both your own life, and that of others.

The Apostle Paul had something interesting to say on loneliness in his timeless first letter to the Corinthians chapter 13. He wrote, 'For now we see in a mirror, dimly (as through a glass, darkly), but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.' He is contrasting how we view life now with the life that will be enjoyed in what is called 'God's Kingdom, yet to come'. Suggesting that in our current state we do not see things clearly and that this is a cause of loneliness. The problem is we do not see God, each other, or life fully ('face to face') and thus we feel cut off, separate and alone. He is suggesting that only after death will we see fully. Paul is drawing on the Jewish tradition here, that no one can ever see the face of God, that it is always partially hidden behind a veil.

In the 'Sermon on the Mount', Jesus says, 'Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God,' suggesting a way to see clearly the face of God and thus one another. Could this be the bridge that relieves ours and others' loneliness? This, to me, is what it means to create the Kingdom of God – what I prefer to



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name the 'kin-dom of love', right here, right now. For me this is what it means to live spiritually alive; this is what it means to remove from our being the veils that separate us from the Divine, from life and the people around us, thus relieving the ache of one another's loneliness.

The problem is that so few of us want to go there. How many of us want to experience what it means to be alone. We need not fear being alone, as my time alone proved that Monday. You can be 'Lonely but not alone' and you can be, 'alone but not lonely'.

That day, as I sat alone in silence I found myself utterly surrendered to the power of the moment I was in. As I sat there, the following words by David Whyte came onto my being, 'Sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet confinement of your aloneness...' It made me think about those bulbs in the cold dark earth, waiting to come alive.

So many people fear these two things, especially at this time of year 'darkness and the confinement of our aloneness.' The truth is that we need to experience them in order to truly connect with what is at the core of all being, and to fully connect with life itself – and the people we share our lives with. Then we see life as it really is, and we begin to build that 'kin-dom of love'. We live together, one and all.

It is quite possible to be, 'lonely but not alone' and you can find yourself completely 'alone but not lonely'. The key is connection; connection to ourselves, to life, to the people around us and to whatever we believe is at the core of all life – what I call God. Sometimes it takes an experience of deep loneliness to allow us to know this, to see clearly.

Loneliness is something we will all experience in our lives. I bet we have all felt it at some time in the last week. The problem isn't the feeling, but how we respond to it. It may well be an opportunity to connect – to connect to those deep places within us, to connect to the core of all life and to truly connect to one another. The problem is not the feeling of isolation and loneliness, but how we respond to this experience.

We all feel lonely at times. It is the one thing you are not alone in, feeling. May our shared loneliness lead us all to deeper connections.

The Rev Danny Crosby is minister at Urmston and Altrincham.

Unitarians must listen to our hearts

By Philip Colfox

My autonomic nervous system is a very sophisticated instrument. If it's working well in tune, I can perform. If not, I'm a bit of a train wreck. I have to listen to my emotions very carefully and understand them.

For instance two examples:

I went to an Anglican Armistice Day service.

The language of the service, replete with God, Christ and Jesus, went over my head – my heart did not hear the words. The language did not work for me. Quite simply I don't believe it.

Whereas I have a friend whose major wish in life is to be a soldier. He loves parades and even though he is now at army retirement age and was invalided out 30 years ago, he hangs around, loving it and has got himself a badly paid job running the cadets and another being an undertaker. He loves the sense of national belonging he gets from the Anglican Church and the British Army and the sense of order from the army and funeral services.

But I feel out of place in that world. I am a rebel. So that's my autonomic nervous system – rebel, me. That's who I am. But my best friend is the opposite and we are still best friends. The difference is obvious and I can see it instantly. I know I'm different, yet we can be friends without having to worry that we are different to each other. I don't need to change him. I know his heart tells him one thing and mine tells me something different and, for me, that's OK.

The other example of my subconscious, automatic or autonomic nervous system is my experience on a recent business deal. The numbers were 10 times larger than normally involve me. So I structured a complicated deal to have very low risk. However I had to use and rely on outsiders and new colleagues. Suddenly I stopped sleeping properly and felt physically ill. As I had many different things happening at the time, it took me months finally to isolate and discover what the problem was. It turned out to have been a very strange matter of my being too relaxed over two very obvious conflicts of interest by members of the team. My brain said it was OK and knew it was happening but my heart did not like it. My heart or my subconscious nervous system knew it was seriously wrong, in fact that it dramatically increased risk, but my heart has no voice and could only express itself via emotional pain.

It is my brain that talks to me and it did not say 'don't go to the service. You won't like it.' And it did not say: 'these conflicts of interest are too severe. You must change the deal.' On both occasions it was left to my heart to say it. But my heart had no voice.

It only speaks to me through my guts. For some unknown reason my emotions are expressed to me through pain in my



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tummy and tension throughout my body. I then tense up, all over and stop sleeping. It's very painful. I really don't like it!

As my heart speaks without words, the interpretation of these bodily pains is hard. I kept asking my wife, 'why do I feel so ill?' I asked close friends. None knew because only I know what happens in my heart. I did not know which aspect of my life was causing the problem, let alone why or how. Now, months later I can work it out. People said things to me that my brain did not process properly but these words were processed subconsciously in my heart.

Time spent in understanding my heart is time very well spent. This sometimes happens when I am asleep. However it does not happen on demand. It happens in its own time, when given space. Like when I meditate or pray. This is the sort of subject that psychologists study, which is why I think there is such a strong link between religion and psychology.

Therefore time spent looking inwards, in understanding what it is at heart to be a Unitarian will be time well spent.

It is not easy to hear what it is to be a Unitarian because hearts don't think and they don't feel. They only supply the body with pleasure or pain. We must work hard to interpret that pleasure or pain and we can only do it ourselves by looking inwards. If we were Anglicans like my friend, we would have a greater power called Christ to whom we could abrogate the responsibility of assuring us that all is OK and interpreting our feelings. But we are different and the task of listening to the voice that exists in our hearts and which does not speak in words has to be carried out alone.

Sometimes the brain hears and interprets the heart when we are asleep. For some of us our practices or rituals or habits help us understand our other half ... our natural or unconscious half. Is that half of us an emanation of a God or religion or is it just the way our physiology and/or emotions and our brain works? Or is the unconscious half just a theory which works for me, which enables me to make sense of my life?

I think for us Unitarians it does not matter what the metaphysical question is. What matters is that the answer must be useful. The answer need not even be right or wrong. In this case I believe that the theory that the heart cannot speak and that we must be patient and attentive in listening to it is a very useful theory. It explains to me how to turn the pain of anxiety about an unknown concern into a very powerful extension of my brain and my ability to deal with life. Therefore I say: 'Listen to your heart. It cannot speak. Be patient or you will not understand it.'

Philip Colfox is a member of Bridport Unitarians.

A tale of a perfect village



By Kate McKenna

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Once upon a time, there was a village. It was a beautiful village, just like a village in a story.

It had pretty cottages, and just the right number of useful shops selling everything you might need, and a pretty church, and a cricket field, and a river running past the end of the main road, and it was just beautiful.

And everyone who lived in it was beautiful, too. And they were all good at what they did. And they were all nice to each other. It was perfect.

Except for one thing. Everyone was worried that everyone else was just a little bit more perfect than they were.

The man at one house, who had a glorious garden in which everything grew perfectly and which weeds didn't bother to visit, was worried about the woman at the next house, whose windows always sparkled as if fairies had come and cleaned them with magic window-cleaning spells.

And she was worried about the man next door to her, whose children were always a tiny bit more polite than hers.

And he was worried that the woman next to him cycled to the cute little rural railway station (where the trains were always clean and on time) a tiny bit faster than he did.

And she was worried that the man next to her had nicer hair.

And he was worried that the woman next to him seemed to earn a bit more money than he did.

And she was worried that the man next to her was a better cook.

And he was worried that the woman next to him wore nicer clothes.

And she was worried that ... well, anyway, everyone was just terribly worried about how other people seemed to be better at something than they were.

And one day, for no real reason at all, they all decided that if their neighbour was better than them at something, well, that wasn't good enough. They were going to become even better.

So the man with the lovely garden spent all day cleaning his windows, instead of tending to his garden so he could be better than his neighbour.

The woman with the sparkly windows started ignoring them, and shouted at her children about their manners, so she could be better than her neighbour.

The man with the polite children stopped asking them not to interrupt, because he was out training on his bicycle so he could be better than his neighbour.

The woman who cycled fast to the station stopped cycling at all, in case it messed up her new hairstyle, so she could be better than her neighbour.

The man with the nice hair stopped washing it at all, because he was worrying how to earn more money so he could be better than his neighbour.

The woman who earned more stopped going to work so she could learn to cook better so she could be better than her neighbour.

The man who could cook really well stopped bothering because he was shopping online for nice clothes all day so he could be better than his neighbour.

The woman who was so well dressed stopped taking care of her clothes, so she could do whatever it was that her neighbour did better than her neighbour did it. Just so she could be better than her neighbour.

And eventually, because no one was concentrating on the things they were really good at, the village stopped being so lovely.

And people stopped acting like neighbours, and started acting like competitors, instead. And the once perfect village got shabby and dirty, and the once lovely neighbours got ratty and snarly with each other and stopped being neighbours at all, because it's hard to be a neighbour and a rival.

And all because no one was happy enough with what they were good enough at.

The Rev Kate McKenna is minister at Bury.

News in brief

Registration opens for 2019 annual meetings

GA keynote announced

Lord Mark Price will be the keynote speaker at this year's Unitarian General Assembly meetings, scheduled for 16-18 April at the Birmingham Metropole Hotel.

This year, with the new three-day timetable decided on by last year's assembly, the keynote address and John Relly Beard lectures have been combined. Lord Price will deliver the lecture, titled 'Workplace Happiness: Why Should We Care' at 8pm on 16 April.



Lord Price

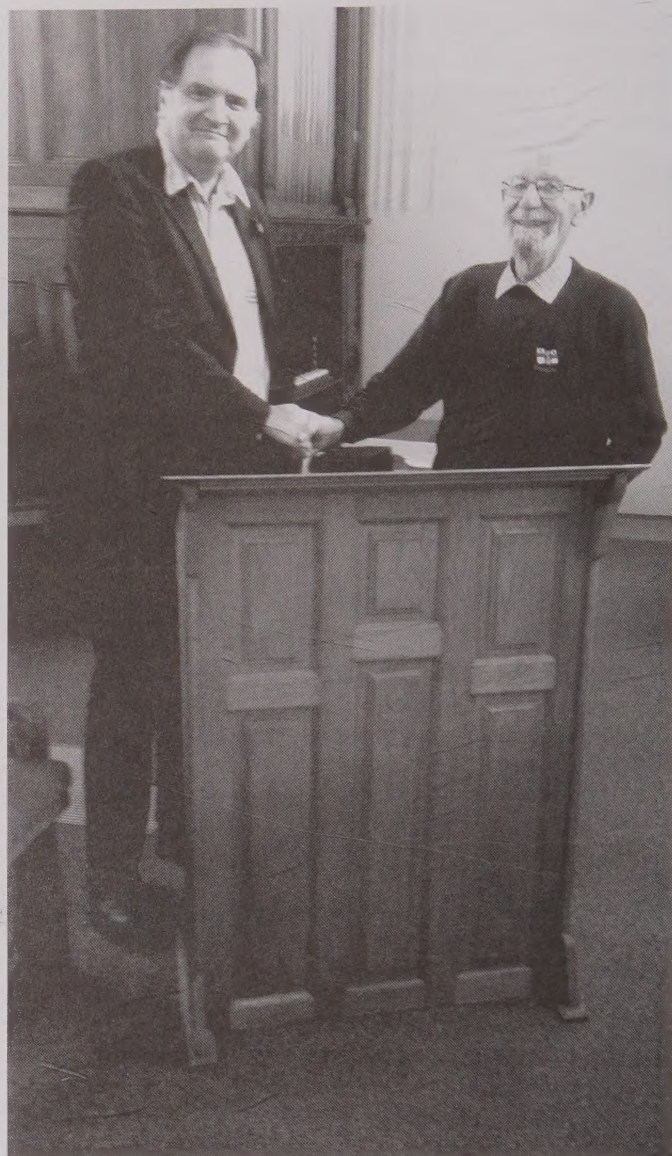
Lord Price spent most of his career in the John Lewis Partnership, rising to managing director of Waitrose and deputy chairman of the partnership.

He was chair of Business in the Community 2011-15 and The Prince's Countryside Fund 2010-16. He also sat on the Board of Directors of Channel 4 TV, serving as deputy chair from 2013-16. He was appointed Commander of the Royal Victorian Order in the 2014 New Year's Honours for his work with Business in the Community and The Prince's Countryside Fund. He is also Life Patron of Grocery.

In February 2016 Lord Price was appointed the United Kingdom Minister of State for Trade and Investment and was made a life peer. He left the government in September 2017 to pursue his writing and business interests and remains a member of the House of Lords. To date he has published five books on business, food and for children.

The meetings offer opportunities to socialise, worship and learn with hundreds of Unitarians from across the UK. A 90 percent discount on total costs is available for those aged 17-39.

The final date for bookings is 19 March. Further information on the Unitarian General Assembly meetings is available here: <https://unitarianmeetings2019.com>



Framlingham Unitarian Meeting House was delighted to be presented in November with a bespoke oak-wood lectern crafted by Alan Coldwell, who also serves as treasurer of Bury St Edmunds congregation. These two groups share the services of the Rev Matthew Smith as minister, who is seen in the picture with Alan behind the new lectern. Matthew said, on receiving the lectern, 'This new feature will be a wonderful addition to our services.' Detail of the chalice carved in the lectern is below. Photos by Ewout Van-Manen



Participants prepare for the banner parade at the 2018 General Assembly meetings. Photo by John Hewerdine

